

F. Over the Snow Designated Trail Routes

This section focuses on snowmobile and cross country ski trails.

Key Points

- There has not been an increase in snowmobile routes or ski trails across the Forest. The Forest Plan allows for a maximum of 100 miles of additional snowmobile trail miles (O-ORV-2), but S-WL-2 allows no net increase in groomed or designated over-the-snow trail routes ...unless the designation improves lynx habitat through a net reduction of compacted snow areas. The discrepancy in terms of the intent of the Forest Plan needs to be reconciled.

Monitoring question

To what extent is the Forest maintaining no net increase in groomed or designated over-the-snow trail routes unless the designation effectively consolidates use and improves lynx habitat through a net reduction of compacted snow areas?

Background

All Grant-In-Aid (GIA) snowmobile trails on the Chippewa National Forest are operated and maintained through agreements with Cass and Itasca Counties. In turn the counties partner with local snowmobile clubs who perform grooming and trail maintenance. There are a total of 21 GIA trails on the forest.

Cross-country snowmobile travel is prohibited and has been since the 1986 Forest Plan. To provide a range of outdoor recreation opportunities the Chippewa National Forest maintains five non-motorized trail systems that are groomed for cross-country skiing. Grooming is performed by Forest Service personnel or through partnerships with other government agencies, clubs, or individuals.

The Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy (LCAS) is the guiding document that directs lynx conservation in the United States. The LCAS identified effects of roads and recreational winter trails are largely focused on winter access into lynx habitat (Ruediger *et al.* 2000).

Most recreational activities are unlikely to have a large effect on the prey base, unless the activity is concentrated within primary forging sites or directly reduces habitat and prey abundance. Recreation is more likely to impact lynx by compacting snow through over the snow trail routes, allowing competing predators to access lynx habitat; or by creating disturbances of a magnitude or timing that make a forging site largely less desirable for lynx.

Results

2004 Miles of Trail

Table 6-10. Miles of trail in 2004.

Snowmobile Trails		
District	Trail	Miles
Deer River Ranger District	Avenue of Pines	21.9
	Bowstring East	19.1
	Bowstring West	41.9
	Cameron	14.4
	Ditchbank	13.2
	Marcell North	14.2
	Marcell South	10.3
	Pipeline	14.2
	Spider Lake	3.1
	Suomi Hills	17.1
	Taconite	3.1
	Winnie	14.1
Walker Ranger District	Chippewa C	23.0
	Eagle Country	6.6
	Eagle Loop	12.3
	Lost Girl	19.5
	Paul Bunyan	12.3
	Snowway One	7.3
	Soo Line	21.0
	Sucker Bay Connection	8.0
	Triville	18.8
Total Miles:		315.4

Cross-Country Ski Trails		
District	Trail	Miles
Deer River Ranger District	Suomi Hills	20.5
	Joyce Estate	11.1
	Simpson Creek	13.5
Walker Ranger District	Shingobee	5.6
	Goose Lake	11.8
Total Miles:		62.5

2011 Miles of Trail

Between 2005 and 2009 there have been temporary reroutes of snowmobile trails due to logging operations, flooded sections of trail by beaver in the fall, and larger projects such as the Enbridge Pipeline.

These reroutes are temporary in nature lasting a few weeks to 1-2 seasons depending upon scope of the project. After the project is complete use is re-established along the original GIA trail.

Additionally, there have been and will continue to be minor reroutes that are necessary to correct changes in recreation easements for GIA trails over private lands. These corrections are typically made using unplowed forest roads that result in no net gain in snow grooming activities. If a reroute requires earth disturbing activities a decision notice or memo is prepared to disclose environmental effects.

In 2009 a decision memo for the Cottonwood Lake Spur Snowmobile Trail Reroute was signed and implemented. This project rerouted approximately .7 miles of the Suomi Hills Snowmobile Trail and abandoned an equal distance. This resulted in no net gain of groomed trail on the forest. There have been no other major snowmobile or cross-country skiing projects during the monitoring period.

Implications

There has not been an increase in the snowmobile routes across the Forest thus no reduction in large tracts of undisturbed areas desirable for lynx. However, this monitoring question looks to the effect of designated over-the-snow-trail routes and roads used by snowmobiles but do not consider a designated trail that may also affect the lynx habitat. This use of roads and other habitat effects such as continuous habitat and population /distribution of prey species may also have effects on lynx.

New Issues

Each year for the past four years snowmobile clubs from Itasca County approach the Forest Service with proposals to add approximately 20 miles of groomed Grant-in-Aid snowmobile trails that follow existing roads. The intention is to create additional trail riding opportunities and to connect local businesses to the extensive snowmobile trail system. The Forest has not had the budget to respond to these proposals.

Further evaluation of the Forest Plan in the context of responding to the creation of snowmobile trails has identified the discrepancy between S-SWL-2 and O-RMV2. Analysis and evaluation should be directed toward a resolution.

Recommendations

- Monitor snowmobile use of unplowed forest roads for potential consolidation into the Grant-In-Aid snowmobile trail system.
- Monitor snowmobile and other winter recreation activity use on non-designated winter trails that may impact forging sites within large undisturbed areas.
- In cooperation with the MN DNR, Beltrami/Cass/Itasca Counties, and local clubs, develop a strategic plan for the allocation of the 100 miles of snowmobile trail across the forest.

- Reconcile the discrepancy between the O-RMV-2 and S-SWL-2 in terms of the original intent of the Forest Plan.

A more detailed report is in the project file and is available upon request.